Book Discussion on Gary Webb and Kill the Messenger

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Nick Schou talked about his book Kill the Messenger: How the CIA's Crack-Cocaine Controversy Destroyed Journalist Gary Webb, published by Nation Books. The book details the story of Gary Webb, a reporter who wrote a 1996 newspaper series linking the Central Intelligence Agency to cocaine distribution in Los Angeles. Mr. Webb's reports were dismissed by many major news organizations, but the book's author, Nick Schou, argues that it was not Mr. Webb, but his editors, who sensationalized the story. Mr. Webb committed suicide in 2004. Mr. Schou was interviewed on the BookTV Bus while at the Los Angeles Times Festival of Books.

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north of Los Angeles Times festival of books held every year on the campus of UCLA the book TV bus has made this one of it stops as it goes nationwide inside the bus today we have nick schou he is the author of this book kill the messenger how the CIA's crack cocaine controversy destroyed journalist Gary Webb when did you meet Gary Webb actually only met Gary once when he was doing a book tour 1998 at a bookstore in Santa Monica but I had actually gotten to know him sort of over the phone as a reporter because a member the drug ring that he wrote about was an ax Orange County cop and I cover law enforcement in Orange County so actually wrote several follow-ups about his investigative work before I ever met him what is what was the crux of the investigative work that got so much attention well Gary you know wasn't the first reporter that it actually probed this whole issue of drugs that were coming into the United States in the 1980s a lot of stories have been written about that at the time and even john kerry when he was a senator had had held hearings i'm trying to get to the bottom of that issue but the media basically kind of ignored the store in in some cases even ridiculed Kerry and Gary found out 10 years later where a lot of these drugs that were alleged to have come in during this Iran Contra era had ended up and connected them to the biggest crack dealer in LA history Freeway Ricky Ross and because Ross was already kind of a celebrity drug figure with LA Times had labeled the kingpin of crack cocaine his series received a lot of attention especially in the black community and it was a for a while at least a huge sensation he was on the television and radio every day a couple of months after his story came out the major newspapers which would pretty much ignored that story up until it reached a real fever kind of pitch began printing stories attacking his work and claiming

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stories attacking his work and claiming that there was no evidence that the CIA had any involvement with this drug ring or had anything to do with the bringing drugs into the country you write that his editors betrayed him how well I Gary was a very aggressive reporter according to the people that work with them throughout his career and they felt that Gary worked best as all good investigative reporters do when they have a relationship with their editor where they have someone that can actually be as passionate about the stories then but also kind of like restrain the reporter to the certain extent that will protect the story from going further than the facts now Gary is reporting as I found actually was accurate in fact after he'd already been attacked and discredited the CIA acknowledged that it had covered up its relationship with drug traffickers during the

1980s and only admitted this after Gary had already lost his job but the story you know had some very inflammatory language in that in the lead paragraph and ran on the internet the first major news story to run simultaneously online with the logo showing someone smoking crack superimposed over the seal the CIA so a lot of my book kind of focuses on this story kind of got out of Gary's hands a little bit and how because he had editors that were only sort of too eager to hype the the facts that he had created such a firestorm of outrage that ultimately made it easier for the papers to criticize his work bike by actually debunking the false notion that the CIA deliberately started the crack cocaine epidemic which Gary Webb never believed which I guess to a certain extent the story it implied through its kind of inflammatory lead sense what um what was going on in his life at that time well Gary had risen to the top of his field when he published Dark Alliance he'd been a reporter for 20 years and he clearly had every reason to think that this was the story that was going to really kind of make him one of the most famous and successful investigative reporters and for a while that's what he

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reporters and for a while that's what he was he was one for the San Jose Mercury News and after the criticism started coming in at first his paper defended him but then they basically backed off the story and printed a half retraction half kind of Mayock hope acknowledging that they shouldn't have implied that the CIA knew about this activity when they couldn't really prove it and carry predicted accurately that this was going to be viewed as a complete retraction which it wasn't actually and and he protested this and became very vocal and criticizing his editors for for actually printing this retraction and at that point he was essentially forced out of the paper and left journalism shortly thereafter his life basically became kind of downhill after that when did you first start writing about him are looking at it well I read the story when it came out and I was amazed that the din 1986 after four years of dealing drugs this drug ring had basically been the focus of a big multi-agency law enforcement rate in LA and one most of the places that were rated were in south central or East LA where most of the drugs were found but one of the places that was rated was a mansion in Mission Viejo where a former Orange County cop told the police officers that he worked for the CIA and it turned out that this comp was a money launderer for the drug ring he was providing weapons to gang members that were involved in the drug ring as well as police scanners that enabled them to know when the police were zeroing in on their drug stashes so I spent several years actually investigating that one cop filing Freedom of Information Act request and getting records from the FBI and CIA most of which were censored but which revealed that in fact he did have a business relationship with the former chief of covert operations for the CIA so it's my conclusion that in fact if the rest of the papers that had spent so much energy sort of attacking the story and attacking the conspiracy theories that were sort of floating around it if they'd actually put any resources into really tracking down the evidence that

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really tracking down the evidence that Gary had not quite been able to achieve with his reporting who knows what ultimately would have been proven correct who are you writing for I was running for OC weekly which is an independent that's where I still work it's an alternative weekly in Orange County California it's a sister paper to the village voice in LA Weekly LA Weekly also read my stories as did the San Francisco Bay Guardian when did you decide to change the focus and look at him and not the story well I mean I kept in touch with Gary until shortly before he died in december two thousand four and i was very saddened when i learned read in the newspaper that he committed suicide and the obituary either ran in the LA Times was very I felt dismissive and the Delhi times had never even covered the the CIA report that admitted for the first time they had worked with drug dealers and in fact this obituaries was to me sort of insulting and I felt that somebody needed to really write an accurate biography that really portrayed Gary Webb and the tragedy of his life and also tried to answer some of the questions that have been kind of ignored in the scandal he spent a lot of time with his family yeah I would not have probably been able to have written this book or wanted to have written this book without the cooperation is family because I felt that Gary but as much as the story was kind of misunderstood by people who sort of used it for their own and you know Gary was also very misunderstood and I I didn't in fact know him that well I mostly knew him on a professional basis but after he

had left journalism and wrote his book he was still being criticized as sort of a conspiracy theorist by people that were reviewing his book and I found out that in fact this guy had always gone after corruption and abuses of power regardless of a democrat or republican affiliation he was kind of a equal opportunity muckraking journalist and many of the people that he worked with now are at the paper's like the New York

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now are at the paper's like the New York Times and and and these people all remember Gary's actually like the model of what they wish more reporters would be like a really hard hitting investigative journalist that actually got results actually exposed corruption and you know I think that this book is kind of a cautionary tale for people that are you know considering careers an investigative reporting because it provides an insight account of how this story went so wrong but it's also sort of begs the question of whether our country would be better off if we had more reporters like Gary Webb who you know weren't afraid to take on very powerful institutions what did he do wrong well Gary you know it's not so much what he did wrong is what he what wasn't there to assist him in getting the story out and what he didn't have were reporters or rather editors that were basically he thrived at the mercury news but also before that at the Kentucky post and the Cleveland Plain Dealer where he had very tough editors that basically just sort of made sure that the headlines especially the headlines didn't go overboard he had been sued a couple of times at the Cleveland Plain Dealer but the settlements that the papers ultimately signed were over misleading headlines and ultimately what I found out what Dark Alliance was the facts were there it's just that the headline and this sort of the lead paragraphs the kind of things were rewritten over and over and over in the process of getting this story out in which Gary ultimately doesn't entirely have control over that's what caused the sort of misleading reaction eating the editors were changing the actual text his story was rewritten so many times and went from a four part series to a three part series back to a four-part back to a three part where at the end of the day he didn't even know what version was going to go into the paper because he was on vacation when it altima tlie came out and you know he deserves all reporters you know have to take ownership for anything that appears under their name there's no question

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under their name there's no question about that but with he was the only person that suffered any consequences as a result of the store and ultimately paid a very heavy price but the editors that basically in one case the managing editor that made sure that nobody else at the paper really knew about this project and wanted it to be his sort of he thought that this was going to be a few lets her story and that he would get glory out of it he stopped reading the story halfway through because he had applied for a corporate job and was no longer really paying any attention to the story at all so I actually among other people I interviewed Leo Wolinsky the managing editor the LA Times it was responsible for their criticism of dark lines and he told me in retrospect that Gary got way too much of the blame in this whole scandal that other other editors that were promoted who didn't do a good job editing that story deserve at least as much criticism as Gary God and they carried it exactly what you should expect from a great investigative reporter he was trying to get the story out in the LA Times ironically probably would have printed the story themselves but they as Leo Wolinsky put it might better job editing what happened after he left the paper and what led to the suicide well it's it's a pretty complicated story when you're examining a suicide of anybody I mean there's a lot of different factors that play into it but basically all the people that I interviewed that knew Gary Wow felt that this story was pretty much the central event in his life and that after his after his story exploded in his face and he lost his career in journalism that's when he started experiencing major problems with depression is depression lasted for years he went through divorce and ultimately and committed suicide shortly after having to put his house on the market and he was about to move in with his mother he was 50 years old and the only paper that would Hiram was a small turn ative weekly paper he had just been recently laid off by a state government agency in Sacramento and wanted to get back into journalism it's my feeling if he had been a little bit less depressed and more hopeful he might have been able to get a better job but as it was the job that he had didn't pay the bills and he just reached the end of

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the bills and he just reached the end of his rope what did what do you hope people will get from this book well I mean I I I think it's interesting because few people that are familiar with Gary Webb and with the Dark Alliance story don't already have their mind made up about it one way or the other the either feel that it's complete nonsense and that Gary Webb was a terrible reporter or they feel that Gary was a hero and you know he was unfairly criticized and possibly even assassinated by the CIA which you know was a major part of the reason why I wanted to write this book basically set the record straight about this guy that found him to be a fascinating reporter fascinating human being and his career spanning a few decades in journalism he worked at some very interesting papers with some very interesting people and the totality of his life i think is really a tribute to the best you know aspirations of investigative reporting what was some what was the most interesting response you've gotten from it so far well it's hard to say I one person who I won't mention because he hasn't publicly criticized the book felt that I was far too sympathetic to people that had criticized Gary's reporting when it counted and I made a very deliberate effort to talk to everybody that knew Gary and had anything to say about him including people that work with them at the mercury news that thought that he was a kind of a hot shot or a hothead reporter more sympathetic towards him but I also interviewed all the critics that published articles critical of Gary's work who would speak with me so the book is as objective as I could make it and it's as fair to everybody who is willing to share their views on it as I could possibly make it because I think that that only strengthens the the ultimate conclusion of the book what where are the editors today well one of them works for an environmental organization in New York City left journalism as Jerry suppose who was the editor of the paper at the time recently retired and is living on a vineyard in Northern California and the dreaded early was working hardest with them but who was also supervising several other stories and fifty reporters are all together is

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and fifty reporters are all together is teaching at Stanford University did any of them talk to you for this book well actually Don Garcia was with the night fellowship at Stanford did and she was the only reported that worked with Gary that actually acknowledged her own mistakes and her own feeling that she had wished that there'd been a better process with the editing but I talked to a lot of people that the mercury news but the other editor is above her that I feel were really ultimately responsible for the problems with the store we're the only people actually the wouldn't talk to me nick schou is the author of this book kill the messenger have the CIA's crack cocaine controversy destroyed journalist Gary Webb thank you for your time thank you

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